

## **A Letter to Leaders in Agriculture**

Dear Colleagues,

March 1 will be a historic day for our country. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will consolidate and assume operational control of thousands of Federal employees dedicated to protecting the United States from foreign threats.

We in the agriculture community have always been aware of the threat of exotic animal and plant pests and diseases. The many outstanding men and women of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) have fought against that threat by inspecting people and cargo arriving from foreign countries. Our Agricultural Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program has traditionally focused on the accidental, inadvertent entry of pests and diseases. Travelers and shippers could easily unknowingly “pack a pest” and bring a major problem to our borders. Some could bring along some food and, believing that they could never cause a pest or disease outbreak, try to evade our inspection system. Of course, we have always known that “it only takes one” and have maintained our vigilance.

Today’s world presents a new threat to U.S. agriculture, well beyond the unknowing or the unintentional. America’s food supply—the envy of the world—is itself a prime target for terrorists and those who would harm our country and its people. Understanding that and seeing the need and wisdom in ensuring full coordination of all agencies dedicated to protecting our borders from all kinds of threats, President Bush proposed to move APHIS to DHS. After hearing from many of you, the Administration reconsidered the approach and suggested limiting the transfer to the AQI program inspectors at the ports of entry and borders. Under this plan, APHIS would continue to set AQI policy and carry out the more scientific aspects of the program such as pest identification and fumigation, as well as conduct the special interstate predeparture inspection activities for flights leaving Hawaii and Puerto Rico destined for the U.S. mainland. Also, APHIS would continue issuing export certificates to meet the requirements

of our trading partners. The Congress concurred, and we have been working hard to implement the decision in a way that serves both agriculture and the general security needs of our country.

I am very pleased to report to you that DHS officials have embraced the need to maintain and even enhance the level of protection U.S. agriculture now receives from the AQI program. On January 30, 2003, I had the honor of accompanying Secretary Tom Ridge and Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security (BTS) Asa Hutchinson on a trip to Miami, Florida, for a Town Hall session with the employees who will merge into DHS on March 1. During the flight, both reaffirmed their strong commitment to the agriculture mission at the ports and borders. We are fortunate that both leaders understand a lot about agriculture. Under Secretary Hutchinson grew up on a farm in Arkansas. Secretary Ridge was Governor of Pennsylvania when we detected plum pox virus and was instrumental in securing State funding and cooperation for a program that protected stone fruit growers throughout the United States. You can be assured that they will hear your voices and concerns in the months and years ahead. Under Secretary Hutchinson was kind enough to add his personal message to you in this letter, and you will find it at the end of this letter.

On March 1, the AQI inspectors will be part of the DHS’ BTS Directorate, specifically part of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (BCBP). BCBP will bring together APHIS, as well as certain U.S. Customs and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) employees to form a group that will focus exclusively on securing our borders and ports of entry while still facilitating the movement of legitimate trade and travelers. Secretary Ridge and Under Secretary Hutchinson are very aware of the importance of trade, especially exports, for U.S. agriculture. BCBP will not contain the investigative and enforcement functions of Customs and INS; those will be part of the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

A Commissioner of Customs will head the BCBP, consistent with the DHS enabling legislation. I know that some have expressed concern that the agriculture mission could be secondary in BCBP. Let me assure you that Under Secretary Bill Hawks and I

have spent scores of hours in discussions with our Customs and Immigration colleagues, and we are convinced that they fully understand the importance of agriculture inspection. They have every intention of succeeding in their total mission and will not leave any part behind. Also, I am serving on a Policy Council along with the other Commissioners and Administrators of the agencies moving to BTS. We meet at least weekly with Under Secretary Hutchinson, and that provides yet another opportunity for U.S. agriculture to sit at the DHS table as its leadership makes momentous decisions affecting our country.

Although about 2,600 AQI inspectors and technicians will become part of DHS on March 1, they will have strong ties to APHIS. We will maintain the agriculture training function, and we foresee training not only agricultural inspectors, but also other BCBP employees who will now include agriculture in their mission too. APHIS will continue to set policy through risk analysis and regulation. The BCBP inspectors will carry out those regulations, and we will work with them on quality control and methods development work. Our top APHIS AQI manager, Ms. Mary Neal, the Assistant Deputy Administrator for AQI, will move to DHS to provide stability, leadership, and advocacy for the agriculture mission. We plan to have agriculture specialists at all levels, from the BTS Directorate through whatever regional and port structure BCBP eventually adopts.

As you know, the AQI program has been a big part of our Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) organization. While transferring some 2,600 employees undoubtedly causes change, let me assure you that Under Secretary Hawks and I see an important and growing future for PPQ. For one thing, PPQ will continue to house the AQI policy and risk assessment functions. Also, I expect to maintain the State Plant Health Director system that I believe has improved our ability to work more closely with States and industry. Finally, we are committed to strengthening and expanding our pest detection program. This program calls for strong partnerships among APHIS, States, industry, and academic institutions. I am pleased to report that the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2004 Budget calls for the same funding increase for pest detection as first proposed in FY 2003.

Yes, this is a dramatic change for APHIS, PPQ, and all American Agriculture. All of us must pull together in the interests of our country, and agriculture is one of those interests. When our AQI inspectors move to DHS on March 1, they will take their agriculture focus and mission with them. I have every confidence that DHS will receive that mission with vigor and a full understanding of its importance for all Americans. Working together—DHS, APHIS, States, farmers, and ranchers—we can make agriculture and all of America safer tomorrow.

Bobby R. Acord  
Administrator

Dear Friends,

I appreciate Administrator Acord giving me the opportunity to talk directly to the leaders of U.S. agriculture. As he noted in his remarks, I grew up on a farm and served a heavily rural State, Arkansas, in the United States House of Representatives. I come to the Department of Homeland Security with a great appreciation of agriculture and the need to protect it from foreign threats.

The USDA seal says it very well: "Agriculture is the Foundation of Commerce and Manufacturing." Because agriculture is so critical to our economy and our way of life, it could easily become a target for terrorists. Our abundant and affordable food supply, which feeds not only our country but large parts of the world, is the result of the hard work of people like you and those you represent and serve. Secretary Ridge and I assure you of our unwavering commitment to U.S. agriculture. I look forward to working with you.

Asa Hutchinson  
Under Secretary  
Border and Transportation Services